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SUBJECT: "CELEBRATION" OF WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY IN
ARMENIA

1. SUMMARY: Competing media organizations sponsored several events on Monday, May 3, in observance of World Press Freedom Day. Generally critical of the government of Armenia, the events also revealed a certain amount of intramural hard feelings in the world of Armenian journalism. The U.S. Embassy contribution stressed a free press as a cornerstone of democracy and continued U.S. support for the development of a free press in Armenia. END SUMMARY

YEREVAN PRESS CLUB-LED ROUNDTABLE

2. "Partnership for Open Society," a coalition of media organizations and NGOs that support a free press in Armenia, sponsored a noon-time roundtable featuring Boris Navasardyan, president of the Yerevan Press Club, as master of ceremonies. Other panelists included the DCM, whose remarks stressed traditional U.S. support for freedom of the press and continued engagement in the development of a free press in Armenia.

3. Other speakers on the panel took a much more critical stance. The German ambassador, stating that he represented the European Union (as Ireland, currently the president of the EU, does not have an embassy in Armenia), pointed out that the GOAM had undertaken certain commitments on becoming a member of the Council of Europe, and that recent government actions had called into doubt whether the GOAM was capable of living up to those commitments. The UN Department of Public Information representative read the message of the Secretary General of the UN, while the UNDP representative strongly criticized the GOAM for going backwards on press freedom in recent months. The chairwoman of the Armenian parliament's Standing Committee on Science, Education, Culture and Youth Issues, Hranoush Hakobian, read a slightly exculpatory statement arguing that cooperation between the legislature and the media resulted in the new law "On Mass Communication." The Country Manager of the World Bank Armenia Office's statement at times appeared to criticize the GOAM, but tended to veer into self-criticism for not more effectively publicizing World Bank programs in Armenia.

4. The chairwoman of the Union of Journalists of Armenia (UJA) concluded the panel by reading out a bill of particulars against the GOAM, calling on the Freedom House 2003 report for further evidence that the Armenian media is not free. The UJA statement criticized the government for criminalizing libel, refusing to provide a broadcast license to the television station A1+, not preventing or investigating attacks on journalists, and for police attacks against journalists in the course of recent demonstrations.

RALLY IN SUPPORT OF A1+

5. Also on May 3, about 150 people participated in a rally and demonstration in support of A1+, marching from the House of Press to Charles Aznavour Square. The journalists repeated their demands that the GOAM hold broadcasting licensing competitions for the as-yet-unassigned television frequencies, and to include representatives of public organizations on the board that evaluates the bids.

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB EVENT

6. Later in the day, the National Press Club held its own World Press Freedom Day event which featured an "Enemy of the Press" award ceremony. "Winners" included President Robert Kocharian, who was named an Enemy of the Press for the third year in a row; this year Kocharian was cited for signing the law "On Mass Communication" and for failing to pursue cases against those who commit violence against journalists. Hranoush Hakobian (see paragraph 3 above) was also named as an Enemy of the Press for passage of the law "On Mass Communication." (COMMENT: The president of the National Press Club had her own draft of the law,

which was actually more restrictive than the final result. However, she appears to have decided that anyone who worked on or supported the law as it now stands is opposed to a free press - see especially the next nominee. END COMMENT) Boris Navasardyan, president of the Yerevan Press Club, also earned a nomination for an Enemy of the Press award (for his work on the current law "On Mass Communication"), but didn't garner enough votes to be declared an enemy. Interestingly, although there were a number of nominations for Friend of the Press, no one received enough votes to win that designation.

17. The participants also criticized the GOAM in line with the Yerevan Press Club roundtable above, and issued their own statement in support of television station Al+.

18. COMMENT. It is generally recognized that the GOAM has significant control over the political news broadcast on television, either through direct ownership (national public TV), ownership of stations by friends of the current administration, or by self-censorship among the rest of the broadcasters (taking their lesson from what happened to Al+ and Noyan Tapan TV stations). The print media, on the other hand, expresses a wide variety of opinions, but is weak (most newspapers are not commercially viable and require support from a "backer"), highly politicized (reflecting the views of the "backers"), and not very available outside of Yerevan. Armenian media figures certainly have reason to call for greater freedom of the press in Armenia, and took advantage of the observance of World Press Freedom Day to speak out. One can only hope that their message will be taken seriously, by the government and the media alike. END COMMENT.

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